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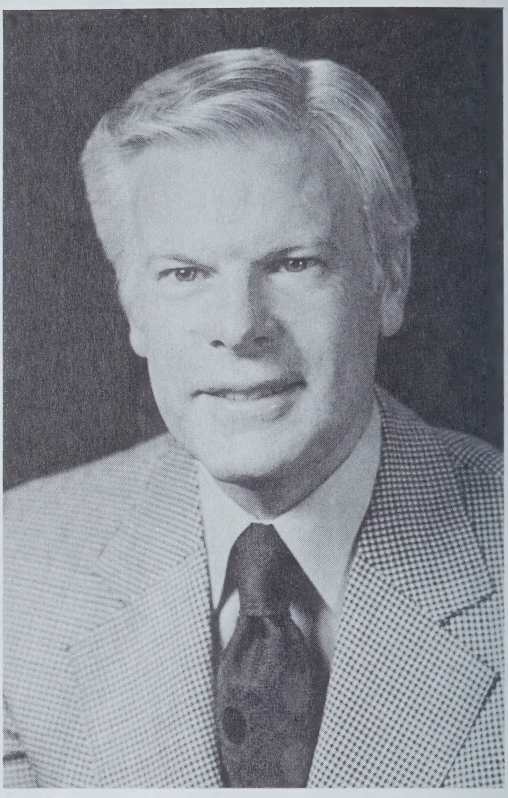
Our Emerging Canada

Education's role in fostering an improved sense of national understanding

Hon. Thomas L. Wells
Minister of Education, Ontario



Ontario's Education Minister
Thomas Wells

This booklet is a condensation of addresses by Mr. Wells to conferences of The Ontario School Trustees' Council and the Ontario Secondary School Headmasters' Council

February, 1978

1 National Understanding in a New Generation

Through the years in this Province, the education community has responsibly and successfully addressed itself to problems and issues as they have arisen. Through a cumulative process, the net result is, today, a school system that compares favourably to any in the world.

I say this on the basis of personal comparison, not on the basis of naive optimism. I have myself, as many of you have, looked at education in many other jurisdictions – including some to which we have had a habit of looking for inspiration and ideas – and very rarely do I find our Ontario schools lacking.

In our preoccupation with the day-to-day responsibilities and concerns which confront all of us, it is well, on occasion, to reflect on the broader picture, and to see our role in a larger context.

Education has always been crucial in Canada's development as one of the world's most respected nations and in the evolution of our democratic society.

It has been our route to career advancement and social mobility.

It has been responsible for the growth of mass literacy.

It has spurred us to great scientific and technological accomplishments.

It has improved our collective health and extended our individual life span.

It has provided a continuity for our social and political institutions.

It has, in short, enabled us

- to implement some of our finest ideals,
- to assume international responsibilities, and, thus,
- to advance not only ourselves but people everywhere.

Throughout our history, our schools have met many challenges and changes. On the whole, we can be proud of the job they have done.

That is why, in 1978, I am optimistic about the ability of our education system to meet what I regard as the greatest challenge of our time: *to foster and develop in a new generation of young people the concept of national understanding.*

I use the term national understanding rather than national unity because the latter is a term which has become embroiled in political argument – and which, in a sense, is meaningless in the Canadian context because it implies an imposed homogeneity.

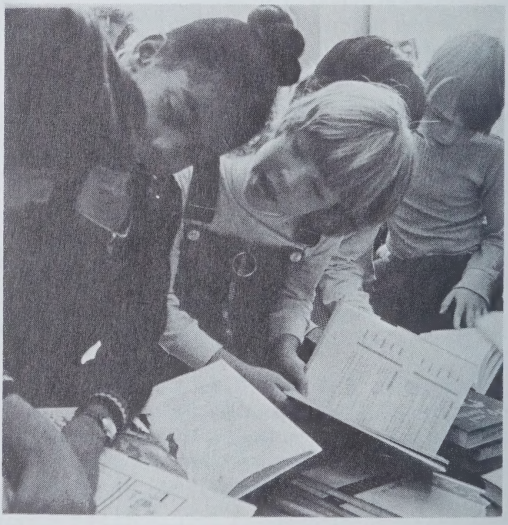
That is neither desirable nor feasible for Canada. What we want to develop in our students, rather, is a sense of who we Canadians are, and what we are all about.

National understanding is predicated on a feeling of national identity – and this has long been a problem in Canada. Do we have an identity of our own? Some of our most respected observers over the years have suggested not.

For much of its history, Canada had neither a flag nor a national anthem of its own. We were, until not too many years ago, a Dominion, lacking the symbols of an independent nation. And much of our patriotism was directed toward symbols which had been transplanted on our shores.

In more recent years, we have been more self-conscious than ever about living in the shadow of the power to our south. We have expressed concern about our economic independence, our cultural independence, even our political independence.

While such concern is indeed healthy, our apprehensions are often exaggerated. For we live today in an interdependent world.



We – and our children – are in many ways members of a global community. We have come to the shocking realization that many of our natural resources – which we have always viewed as our key to long-term strength – are indeed finite, and that we are dependent on other nations for some of our basic necessities.

Yet within this global community, others accord us a national identity that we frequently refuse to accord ourselves.

They do not see us as an appendage. They respect our counsel. And they have praised our leadership in the United Nations, at the Geneva Disarmament Conference, and in many other international bodies.

In our long and sometimes painful identity crisis, there have been some truly shining moments. Our 100th birthday, combined with Expo '67, gave Canada and Canadians everywhere a buoyancy and a renewed sense of dedication to purpose and ideals. So too did our hospitality during the 1976 Summer Olympics.

A strong feeling of national identity in this country depends upon an educated sense of national understanding. And that is what we – adults and young Canadians alike – appear to lack these days.

While many of us recognize this problem, we have a tendency to see it mainly in one context: the Quebec situation. That is understandable, to be sure. But it is short-sighted – because to some Canadians, there also seems to be an Ontario problem; to others, an Alberta problem; to still others, a British Columbia problem; and so on.

In fact, our regionalism – while at times appearing to be an asset – is at other times a problem. So too, is the geographic isolation of many Canadians.

But other countries have not allowed similar geographic characteristics to stand in the way of national understanding. And it is time we stopped offering up those characteristics as an excuse.

They certainly cannot excuse the ignorance which most Canadians have about their country. Study after study has shown among our students – not to mention our adult population – a shocking lack of knowledge about this country: its history, its system of government, its geography, its peoples, and its current issues.

If we are concerned about this – and as educators and community leaders we ought to be very concerned – then we have a job to do, and we cannot afford to waste time.

What is it that we want to do? What is it that we *need* to do?

For one thing, we want to impart to our young people an improved sense of perspective, against which they can view contemporary Canada with insight.

At the same time, we want to give our young people a better understanding of our geography, our diverse peoples and their contributions to the enrichment of our way of life, the British North America Act, our system of government, the powers of governments at various levels, and our international relations and contributions.

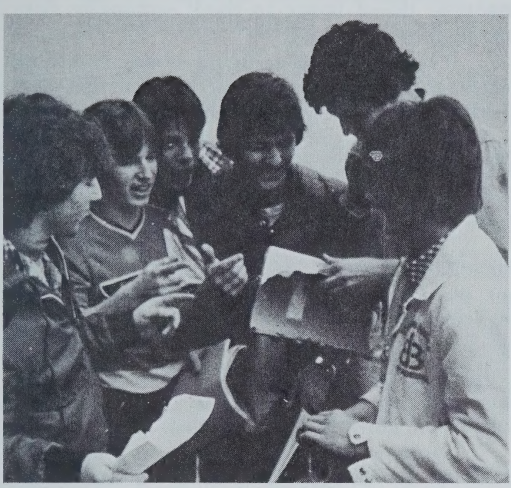
Certainly we want to familiarize our students – at an age when they can understand the complexities – with the problems and the blessings of our nationhood today.

We want them to understand our official languages, and, partly through those languages, to gain an appreciation of our diverse cultures.

We want to develop in them a respect for differences and diversity.

That may read like a short agenda, but is a tall order. As I see it, there are three very definite challenges for education which should be addressed now by governments and educators alike, across all of Canada:

- First, we have an urgent need to develop in this country a common core curriculum in Canadian history and Canadian geography that can be supplemented by the individual provinces without undermining their autonomy in matters of education.
- Second, we must extend ourselves in ensuring that vastly-increased numbers of our young people develop a capability in both of our official languages.
- Third, we must strengthen and expand our French-language school system so that our French-speaking young people have full educational opportunity in their first language.



2 Basic Common Courses in Canadian History and Geography

The very mention of curriculum content common to all provinces, of course, runs head-on into the jealously-guarded constitutional autonomy for education which falls to each province.

Down through the years, the concept and practice of education as a provincial domain has become fully engrained as a sacred tradition – a tradition through which we have benefitted, by and large, but which holds the potential for divisiveness in this country at a time when clearly the need is for more common understanding and co-operation.

At this particular time in our history, there is a need for both educators and governments to lift their sights above and beyond the tradition and the provincial protectionism. There is a need to break through the artificial aspects of jurisdictional barriers, in order to more effectively prepare the young people of our nation for the new Canada which is taking shape today.

There are some basic, fundamental understandings about this country which all young people should possess, regardless of which region or province they live in. In the study of our history and our geography, teachers and students in all of our provinces should be working from similar starting points, with the

essential thrust being to think nationally first and regionally second.

It is in this need to devise a basic common curriculum in history and geography that lies the greatest challenge to provincial education authorities. For only if we can transcend the parochialism that tends to exist in the various regions of Canada today will we be able to make the strides which are needed.

Of course, any steps in the direction of curriculum content which is common to all of our provinces must make full allowance for regional flexibility. But it is not unreasonable to think in terms of basic courses in history and geography that are universal across our nation, supplemented by content that relates specifically to the individual provinces or regions.

Surely we have reached a stage of maturity which will allow us as Canadians to overcome the tendency to think and teach in terms of an Atlantic version of Canadian history, for example, or a Quebec version, or an Ontario version or a western version.

Thus far in the life of our country, our provincial and regional parochialism has robbed many of our young people of an opportunity to know and understand their country in a way that has real meaning and feeling.

The time has come to get together as Canadians and as educators, to try to put aside our provincial instincts in the interests of what is an over-riding national priority – a sustained drive towards a strong sense of national understanding among the young people of Canada.

If we take up the challenge of attempting to develop a basic core curriculum in Canadian history and geography, one focal point for the thrust would be through the Council of Ministers of Education – and that is an initiative which I am prepared to pursue.

In addition, however, the case might be given even more relevance if principals, teachers and other groups, working with colleagues in other provinces, supported and promoted the concept from the ground up. If the education community were to develop a consensus view on the concept, there is little doubt that we could move more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

3 Learning a Second Language – French or English

The second element in this drive for better national understanding is second-language education.

As a nation, we would do ourselves great service and credit were we to break through the barriers of apathy, antagonism and prejudice – and significantly increase the proportion of Canadian young people possessing a capability in both French and English.

It is too easy to confuse the present increasing emphasis in Ontario upon teaching French as a second language as a knee-jerk response to the Quebec situation. But we have been at it for too long to accept that kind of suggestion.

Most particularly, we have seen a steady expansion downward through the elementary grades of French teaching, including a greatly-increased emphasis upon French immersion programs. Increasing number of English-speaking children are at last getting a real chance to begin to learn French at a level that will enable them to grow with the language in a way that will be meaningful and lasting.

This will soon have implications for the nature of French courses taught in the secondary schools, I suspect.

We are very hopeful and optimistic that the larger grants introduced last year to stimulate improved and expanded programs will have a significant effect in strengthening this trend.

Learning a second language, of course, has major educational benefit in its own right. But in addition, in Canada, and especially in provinces like Ontario where there is a significant French-speaking population, there is extra merit in acquiring a knowledge and understanding of the French language.

Through this, we can develop a greater degree of national understanding among Canadians.

Let us remember that more than a quarter of our fellow-Canadians have French as their mother tongue. If there is any one "best" way to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers that have continued to come between our two founding peoples, it must surely be to acquire a competence in each others language – and to

build into such learning the opportunity to become familiar with the culture and heritage that stands behind the language.

While we have come a long way in Ontario, we have yet a long way to go. The going will not be easy, and it will require drive and energy on the part of our education leaders.

It is perfectly obvious, that our present attention to the French language in this country is being viewed with annoyance and even concern by some who do not think of themselves as bigots. What is tragic is that arguments posed even on pedagogical grounds against the increased teaching of French are, in many cases, really the result of prejudices and politics.

There are those in our own province who resort to this kind of irrational thinking, ostensibly in the name of education.

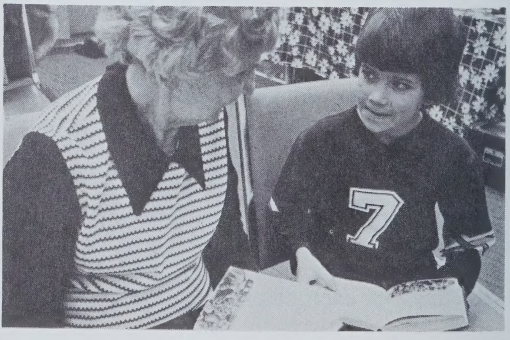
Robert Stanfield, the previous leader of the federal Conservative party, recently put his finger on part of the problem we face. He said:

"English speaking Canadians are very lazy about learning a second language. I am as guilty as the next guy, because I made no serious attempt to learn French until I needed it as a federal politician.

"It is admittedly not easy to learn French in a community where one seldom hears French spoken. But they do it in Europe.

"The basic problem for those of us who are English-speaking is that most of us regard learning a second language as a nuisance, and not as a source of personal enrichment."

To which one might add: as a source of *national* enrichment which could be a major contributor to an improved sense of national understanding among all Canadians, from one ocean to the other.



4 Strengthening Our French-Language School System

Every Canadian who has had an opportunity to travel in Europe – through countries like Switzerland, Germany and France – has witnessed the interaction of various language groups within and between countries. It is always a vivid reminder of the healthy diversity which exists when differing linguistic and cultural groups exist shoulder to shoulder, sometimes, though not always, divided by political boundaries.

So too is it a reminder of the potential which exists in such situations for rivalry, even distrust and animosity.

Everyone with any social sensitivity at all has observed these things in travel abroad. It is natural to let one's thoughts return home to North America, where on so huge a land mass we are blessed with a sense of stability and common interest that comes from the fact that we have but one international boundary dividing our political jurisdictions.

In this vein, it is natural to reflect upon the present embroilment concerning the continued existence of the Canadian political entity as we now know it.

Just as in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, we have a built-in diversity arising from language and cultural differences, a diversity which can and does enrich the lives of those who are able – and willing – to experience the interaction in positive ways.

So also, as in Europe and elsewhere, do we have the potential for divisiveness and animosity -- and it is sad to see our nation experiencing the manifestation of this potential in these present days.

History, it is often said, can tell us much about ourselves, for the past has surely been the path to the present. Today, with our prevading preoccupation over questions of national unity and language rights, it is perhaps natural that we tend to forget that much of this has a familiar ring back through the pages of history, to the early days of Canada as a newborn nation.

In Ontario, the use of French as a language of instruction goes all the way back to the early French settlements. In the years preceding and immediately following Confederation, schools and classes in the French

language were created naturally as the need arose, with no debate or public concern.

During that period, Dr. Egerton Ryerson demonstrated his vision and foresight on the whole matter of French, and strongly took the view that both English and French were the recognized languages of the country, and that it was quite proper for both languages to have equal status in the schools. No one gave much evidence of opposing this view.

Incidentally, some of Ryerson's words ring down through the years with startling clarity – for example when he wrote that the study of French, *"independent of its being regarded as a valuable literary accomplishment, is very important to all Canadian youth who are likely to take part in the public affairs of United Canada."*

But, just twenty years after Confederation, the squeeze was being applied to French in Ontario schools. A sequence of regulations placed increasing emphasis on English as the language of instruction, but still demands mounted for even more pressure to eliminate the French language from the schools, and even from the Province.

The debate was not always characterized by the voice of reason:

- A bishop in London declared that he wanted "to wipe out every vestige of bilingual teaching in the public schools of the Diocese."
- The *Orange Sentinel* preached that "it is this refusal to assimilate that makes the French-Canadian so difficult to get along with."

The storm and controversy reached a culmination in 1912 when the OntarioSuperintendent of Education came down with a tough regulation that virtually wiped out French as a language of instruction after Form 1. Presumably as some kind of transitional concession, there was an allowance for the school year 1912-1913 (and for that year only), permitting French-language instruction for pupils who – in the words of the Department – "owing to previous defective training are unable to speak and understand the English language."

And so it was for the French-speaking people of this Province for years. It was not until 1927 that these hardened attitudes and regulations began to ease.

To the extent that it demonstrates that the

seeds of divisiveness have always been present in our country, this historical perspective perhaps provides a backdrop to the unfolding scenario in which we find ourselves today.

Some may find it rather ironic that many Ontarians, with this blatant squeeze on French in the early pages of their own history, now are expressing concern and outrage as stiffer guidelines are being imposed under the separatist regime – with the shoe on the other foot, of course.

I oppose the actions of the Parti Québecois in reducing the commitment and access to English language instruction in that Province. But one cannot help but note the irony of it all.

The very existence of the separatist government in Quebec has added a new sharp edge to the present circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is a government that has demonstrated not only a firm determination but also an ability to articulate its cause.

And it is a government that has raised issues which relate to the concerns and frustrations of many French-speaking Canadians.

This is not to suggest that the majority in Quebec supports the extreme extension of the cause to the point of separation from Canada, and frankly I do not believe that it does. Nonetheless, as many French-speaking Canadians have long carried pent-up frustrations within themselves, that group of ladies and gentlemen in Quebec City have succeeded, almost overnight , in getting the entire nation talking about some of the issues as they perceive them.

Out of this, many concerned French-speaking Canadians – not only in Quebec but elsewhere in Canada as well – have received a major impetus for pursuing their cultural and linguistic objectives and legitimate aspirations.

English-speaking Canadians, especially those in provinces like Ontario where there is a significant francophone population, face a new reality in this respect. Today, perhaps more than at any time in the past for the Franco-Ontarian, there is a sense of urgency and expectation.

This is accentuated by a genuine concern about the high rate of cultural and linguistic assimilation from among their ranks into the English-speaking mainstream – and they

understandably see the education system as the best line of defense against this trend.

In no sense whatsoever do I interpret this as a threatening stance, either spoken or implied. But I do sense a fresh determination in the minds of franco-Ontarian spokesmen.

I would be less than honest if I did not say that I support the effort and intent of the francophone minority in this Province to preserve their language, to nourish their cultural identity without feeling awkard or out-of-place, and to achieve conditions in which they can feel more comfortable living and working in their own language to the extent that it is practical.

Robert Stanfield recently presented a thoughtful analysis of some of the choices which now lie before English-speaking Canadians. Among other things, he said: *"Accomodations must be reached. They are not likely to be reached if a substantial proportion of anglophones believe that Canada is basically an English-speaking country outside of Quebec – that it would have remained so if politicians had not stirred up the French, and could be restored to such if only politicians would stop catering to the French."*

What, then, is to be done? Premier Davis provided the framework recently when he said: *"We must continue to do what is right. What is right for Ontario is continued expansion of French-language services to meet real needs, openly and directly. That is our formula. It has no ceilings, no fixed budgets, no artificial deadlines. There are no limits imposed by any preconceived notions.*

"What there is is a deeply-rooted commitment to ensure equality of opportunity for the French-speaking population of our province – a commitment tied to nothing more high-blown than a basic respect for the human condition."

It is not my feeling that the French-speaking citizens of this Province are asking for the world. By the very foundations upon which this nation was established, they have a right to feel at home here, to feel self-respect, to be treated equally and to lead fulfilling lives free of political squabbles.

They do not want to be pawns in a political power struggle. They do not want to be viewed as a pesky minority attempting to make unreasonable gains.

They want not simply to be tolerated, but accepted and respected as human beings and equal citizens. They, like all of us, want a feeling of human dignity and belonging.

None of this, for the descendants of one of Canada's two founding cultural and linguistic groups, is too much to ask.

This latter point is a crucial one, one that needs to be firmly imbedded in the minds of every one of us. This nation is striving to build a unique cosmopolitan society, where people from many lands and many cultures may live and work in harmony. We have become a multi-cultural mosaic – a nation of minorities, someone has called it – a loosely-knit patchwork of ethnic groups held together in common cause.

Underlying this developing mosaic, however, is the essential fact that the French language and culture have a special and privileged place in Canada by virtue of the very foundation upon which we stand.

The basic duality of our nation is etched deeply into our history – legally, morally, and in every other way – and it is a fact of our nationhood quite apart from the context of multiculturalism.

Moreover, lest we fail to distinguish between cultural and linguistic groups on all other counts, let us remember again that more than a quarter of our fellow Canadians have French as their mother tongue.

There are those who believe that the present environment in Canada is such that it is opportune to make great strides with regard to French-language education in Ontario. That the time is opportune, in the sense that more *needs* to be done and *can* be done, I agree.

But if by "opportune" is meant that it will now be *easier* to implement further significant advancements, then I must disagree.

The present high-intensity spotlight on French-language education has served to bring out of the shadows many persons with sometimes extreme feelings who previously would not have joined public debate on matters such as this. For policymakers at every level of elected responsibility the result is a highly-charged and highly-exposed atmosphere where advancement can indeed be hard to come by – not impossible, by any means, but certainly more difficult than some idealists would have us believe.

Look back ten years in this province, and see what tremendous strides have been taken educationally for our French-speaking young people, under the cover of relative calm:

- From next to nothing, we built a thriving French-language secondary school system that now serves over 30,000 francophone young people all across the Province – this, of course, in addition to the 74,000 pupils receiving their instruction in French at the elementary school level.
- We have devoted increasing resources to improving the quantity and quality of French-language learning materials and French-language textbooks for use in our schools.
- We have made significant gains in increasing French-language staffing at the Ministry, and at the school board level as well.
- In the last two years or so, we have allocated much additional grant money for the express purpose of improving the quality, and the quantity, of French-language instruction, both as a first and a second language.

This is the foundation, carefully and firmly built primarily over the past ten years, upon which we shall continue to expand – as before, steadily and without diversion.

Our prime motivation shall continue to be the provision of more and better services for our Ontario population, for it would be in error to proceed as if our every action henceforth were suddenly in response and reaction to the Parti Quebecois.

Such has never been the case in the past, and I suggest that it should not be so in the future.

That said, however, all of us must be acutely aware, in this present environment, that our actions and our words can be, and often are, taken as signs of intent and commitment, particularly throughout French-speaking Canada. Whatever is done in Ontario education will be judged by others, perhaps superficially, as having a direct relationship to the intent of English-speaking Canada in the context of the national unity issue.

Already we have seen examples of how animosities and disputes arising from developments in Ontario education can have repercussions throughout much of Canada:

- What are others to think when they see the hostility and bitterness surrounding the creation of a French-language secondary school in Essex County?
- What is the message conveyed when a major Ontario school board decides not to expand its French-language instructional programs for English-speaking pupils on the excuse that they can't be sure that Provincial grants will continue forever?
- What is the impression left from a situation where a lone parent generates a storm of local controversy by refusing to let his youngster learn French?

Being mortals, none of us have full control over such situations. But we must have the savvy to try to keep them to a minimum, the wisdom to deal with them sensibly, and the foresight to keep moving ahead even in the face of such obstacles.

Recently the Council of Ministers of Education prepared, at the request of the provincial Premiers, a report on the state of minority language education in all provinces. This report was the primary subject of discussion at the Premiers' February conference in Montreal, and it will doubtless serve as a springboard to continued progress in the whole area of minority language education across Canada.

In this regard, Ontario's position and commitment is very firm and clear. In September of 1977, Premier Davis put to the Prime Minister of Canada a proposal to amend Section 93 of the British North America Act – in order to guarantee the rights of English-speaking or French-speaking students to receive their education in their own mother tongue, where numbers warrant.

Section 93, of course, already provides for the guarantee of denominational education in Ontario, but judicial interpretation has determined that this guarantee does not extend to the language of education.

What Ontario has proposed is that the time has come to provide for this additional guarantee in our Constitution – and that we would like to have throughout Canada the kind of freedom of choice which has been provided by legislation for our official language minority in this Province for nine years.

Our motive in pressing for this Constitutional amendment is primarily to cement the protection of francophone education rights here in Ontario and in other provinces – and also to ensure that anglophone rights in Quebec will continue to be firmly protected in the years ahead.

5 Attitudes, Commitments . . . and People

The very real and urgent challenge of fostering an improved sense of national understanding among Canadians, especially our young Canadians now in school, will not be achieved easily or automatically. As in all things, we will doubtless not be able to achieve all that we would like, or all that is asked of us, when we would like, or as quickly as we might like.

While delays and diversions will be frustrating, even discouraging at times, we need always to keep our eyes on the real goals. We must know where we are headed, and we must have the resiliency to rebound after setbacks.

What we do in Ontario may or may not ultimately have a bearing on the political outcome in Quebec, although I personally believe that it can and will. But in any case, our present challenge transcends this present debate, because the schools can have a congealing among young Canadians which goes far beyond the context of the separatism issue as it confronts us today.

We have an unfinished agenda in this province, and you and I are in a position to help complete that agenda. We can and must make whatever contribution we can to national understanding, so that the Canada we leave to our children is a nation of which they can be proud:

- a nation that has a knowledge of itself and a sense of its own identity,
- a nation that can continue to be respected throughout the world, not simply on the basis of what it says, or the ideals it professes, but on the basis of what it does for its own citizens.

In the final analysis, it all comes down to attitudes and commitments – and to programs which can be implemented in our schools.

Programs, of course, are really meaningless without people:

- people who are willing to take a chance,
- people who are willing to try,
- people who are willing to confront their own prejudices, and who are willing to abandon the myths that have perpetuated divisiveness, robbing us of our sense of national understanding.

In Ontario education, you and I are the people, in league with all others involved with the schools, who can make the difference. Together we share a responsibility that carries with it great ramifications.

As the dynamics of Canada today unfold, we must all recognize our collective and our individual significance to the education of the present generation of Canadian youth, and the effect this can have on the future of our country.

Let us not feel self-conscious about taking up the cudgels for Canada – or for pursuing steps to foster and develop in our young people, all across this country, a real sense of national understanding.

We must fail neither ourselves nor our young people. We must fail neither our province nor our country.

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